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Mother Goddess

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What plainer tales can portraiture tell?
In forty years, even Kipling's flashbulb
will have lost its charge, his pictures faded.
And these slides in a sleepwalker's head,
frailer even than art, are conceits
treasured by our courtly parents, despised
by us, their metequé children: prints ransomed
from the sun's dusty albums.

MOTHER GODDESS

Objects are lessons: from bowls, brooches, hairpins,
you learn of forgotten lives. The stories say
my grandmother was a fever tree:
two birds sat on her, one pecking
at a grape, the other singing an aria.

What history's bookkeepers do not show
is the tremor down the spine she felt,
the tendril of blood that coiled in her nose
when the whistle of a train announced
her husband's return from a tour of duty.

In the stories, her branches shadow-box
with a rough-wrestling thunderstorm.
Actor and pilgrim, she slips through brick walls,
treads a theatre of scrubbed floors and ember beds.
She leaves me

a loaf of shortbread in the oven,
a page of couplets I'll never read.
And wrapped in a peel of green appleskin,
a Dutch teacup with a windmill
glazed on it, the last one of the set.

Her laundry basket is a hornets' nest
that spits at you. Voyeur, clairvoyante,
urchin-cut waif, she stares in at windows,
her head a gourd hollowed by age,
her hair a silver floss.

Objects are lessons: the light seeps
through the slats, sets off a shimmer
on her lace. The silken thread
that she pulls from her stitching
knots tight around my neck.

THE LAST ANNAL OF ALAMGIR

I

When the heat takes over, I am its creature, and no more a man with a mission. The bomb that has been ticking away for years in the head, stops. The hoopoe that used to tap its long digger beak on the window-pane every morning has flown away; it isn't there to cock its brown crest sharply, to warn me where the next attack might come from. Half the day wasted on an idle game of chess, and now I walk briskly past mansions whose owners have disappeared, empty houses that have wilted, collapsed soggly to the dusty grass of the sidewalks.

Something of their defeatism enters the soul: blood straining at bone, half phantom and half stubborn desire to keep going, I stagger up the long shadows that the streets throw at me. Keep to the right and look out for rogue drivers: even a sleepwalker must keep the law, even as he staggers up those tilted shadows, all the way into the sun at the end of the square.

This, now, is noon. All this and a bell tower that launches itself from a red-tiled roof. The wind flings a rain of silver coins through a crab-apple tree that has squeezed what water it could from this earth, and now makes its last stand. It was here long before my grandfather's soldiers first rode through this province, along roads they had lined with the impaled heads of rebels. And its